

**GOVERNMENT OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
DEPARTMENT OF YOUTH REHABILITATION SERVICES**



Testimony of
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Director
Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services
Committee on Human Services
Friday, March 2, 2007

Good morning, Chairman Wells and members of the Committee. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you at this annual performance oversight hearing. Two years ago, I was sworn into my position, bringing with me what I hoped would be innovative ideas generated from decades of advocacy work and research in the juvenile justice field to help turn around the lives of young people in trouble with the law in the District of Columbia. During the past two years, I have been learning how to translate these innovative ideas into local practice. Like Chairman Wells, I've also had to make the transition from advocating for reform from the outside to implementing those reforms from the inside. The last two years have yielded much success and improved outcomes for youth and their families, but they have not come without some challenges. Today, I will outline what I promised I would deliver two years ago, where we have succeeded, where we are heading, and what challenges lie before us.

The Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services' (DYRS) mission is to "improve public safety and give court-involved youth the opportunity to become more productive citizens by building on the strengths of youth and their families in the least restrictive, most homelike environment consistent with public safety". During my confirmation hearing, I presented the following goals that support this mission:

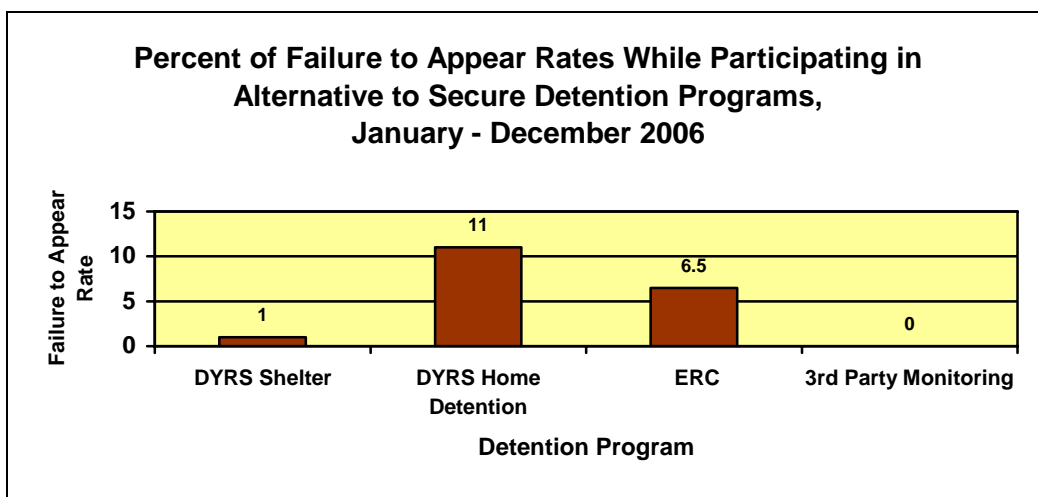
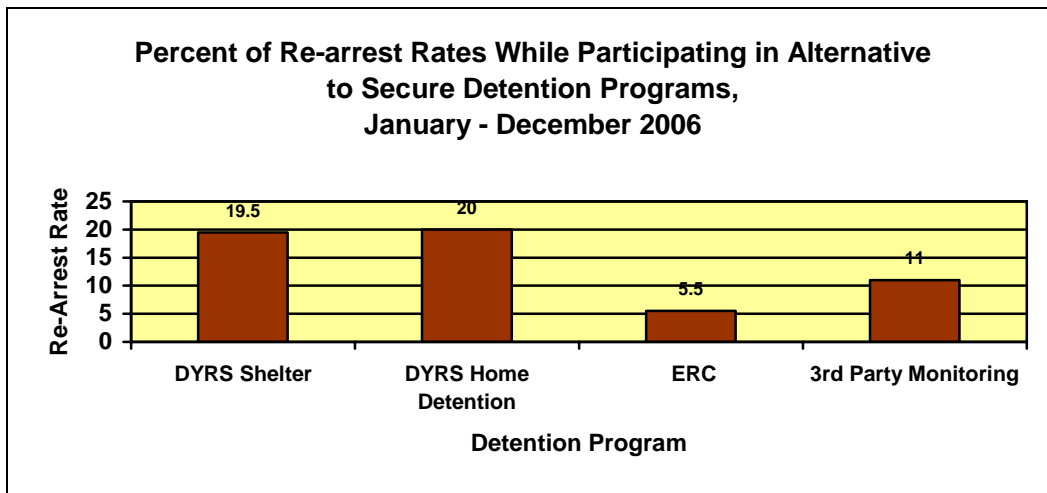
1. develop the nation's best continuum of care that is strength-based and family focused;
2. reduce the use of unnecessary secure confinement and out-of home placements for non-violent offenders;
3. maximize youth, family, community and staff input in our reform efforts;

4. increase interagency and community collaboration;
5. create a “unit management” model that substantially improves conditions in our secure programs, like the kind of model implemented in Missouri.

First, let me begin with the development of our continuum of care, which is essential for reducing the use of unnecessary secure confinement for non-violent offenders.

DYRS is involved with the care of youth who occupy two different statuses in the juvenile justice system. With regard to developing a continuum of care for youth who are in detention status – that is accused, but not yet convicted of a crime – DYRS helped spearhead efforts to get the District of Columbia chosen as a site for the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. We have worked diligently with representatives of the Family Division of DC Superior Court, this committee and the Council’s Judiciary Committee, Court Social Services, the Office of Attorney General, the Public Defender Service, the Metropolitan Police Department, the Department of Mental Health, Child and Family Services Agency, and members of the community to form a solid, working collaborative JDAI effort. Among other things, that JDAI collaborative recently published a resource guide describing the detention continuum that has been jointly developed by DYRS and Court Social Services. We are increasingly tracking data for the continuum so that we can improve services to young people and so that the various participants of the legal system can make educated decisions about whether a youth is dangerous enough or too much of a flight risk to require secure detention, whether he or she can be placed into a community based alternative and, if so, which alternative is most appropriate.

During this time, we have implemented two new detention alternatives - Evening Reporting Centers and Intensive Third Party Monitoring, both of which are highlighted as best practices by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and both of which have helped us reduce the use of secure confinement in cases where such confinement was unnecessary to secure public safety and have produced extremely low re-arrest and failure to appear rates. As demonstrated by the charts below, the best practice community-based alternatives, such as Evening Reporting Centers and Intensive Third Party Monitoring have substantially reduced re-arrest rates and failure to appear in court rates.



The majority of youth in DYRS care, approximately 650, are committed to our custody after having been found involved in delinquent activity. These are the system's deeper end youth whom the courts have deemed inappropriate for placement on probation. While DYRS is not finished developing our continuum of care for these youth, we have begun by adding several creative, non-institutional, community based programs for these youth using mostly home-grown DC vendors.

So, in addition to the options of housing a youth at Oak Hill, placing him or her in an out-of-District residential facility, or putting him or her in a group home, DYRS has added Extended Family Homes, Therapeutic Family Homes and Supervised Independent Living to increase the number of residential programs right here in the District so that we can

finally begin to reduce the number of youth that are sent to out-of-District placements and locked facilities when such facilities are inappropriate. These programs are small, generally housing between one and four youth, and are far more home-like and normalized than congregate care options like Oak Hill, Residential Treatment, or Group Homes. While these programs are too new to have longitudinal data on the outcomes, we know from national research that congregate care custody for youth has been consistently shown to exacerbate rather than ameliorate delinquent behavior so we are hopeful that these programs will produce improved outcomes for youth in DYRS' care.

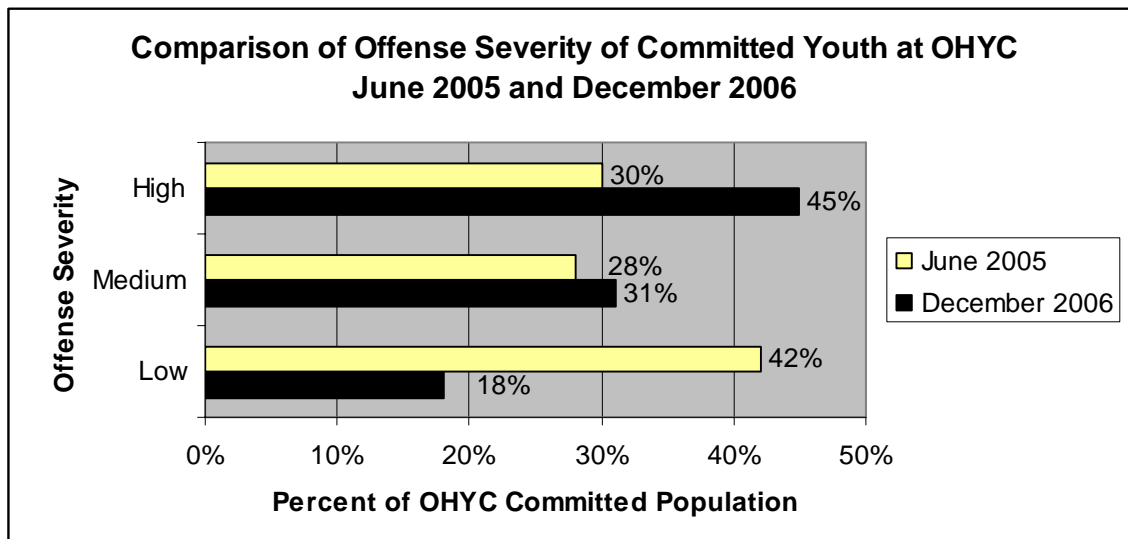
Our agency continues to add components to our community-based continuum and is now heavily focused on implementing evidence based practices such as Multi-Systemic Therapy, Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care and Functional Family Therapy. While the social scientists fell short on coming up with user-friendly names for these programs, they made up for it in demonstrating their effectiveness. Studies show that six times as many boys in Treatment Foster Care as boys in traditional group homes successfully avoided any new arrests. Working in collaboration with DMH and CFSA, DYRS expects to open the District's first Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care Program in the coming months, which will be operated by Foundations for Home and Community and Father Flannigan's Girls and Boys Town.

Functional Family Therapy, a program DYRS launched a few weeks ago in collaboration with CFSA and the Center for Student Support Services, has demonstrated that the intervention cuts re-arrests in half. These programs are also cost-effective. The Washington State Institute for Public Policy reports that for every \$1 invested in MTFC, \$44 are saved by taxpayers and crime victims. Functional Family Therapy saves taxpayers \$29 for every \$1 invested in that model. While these programs will greatly build our capacity to serve youth requiring community-based programming and produce the kind of outcomes we are seeking, they are challenging to implement and will require continuous evaluation and an infrastructure for sustainable funding.

While a robust continuum of care has already assisted us in our second goal of reducing the unnecessary use of secure confinement and out-of-home placements, it is not the sole solution in addressing this multi-faceted problem. In November of 2005, the Casey Consulting Group produced an analysis of the youth population at Oak Hill Youth Center. The findings were startling and required an urgent response. The data did not support the widespread perception that the committed population is reserved for the toughest youth, with multiple adjudications and severe offenses. What we found was that only 30% of the bed days used by the study population were for those committing the most serious felonies. In addition, the length of stay before placement home was inversely related to the severity of offenses committed and prior adjudications. Youth with the lowest level offenses waited 89 days before release from Oak Hill while intermediate level youth spent just 70 days. The most serious offending youth discharged from Oak Hill to home were in secure custody for just 63 days. The data told us that our agency was spending an inordinate amount of resources on youth with low-level offenses who could have been in more appropriate and less costly programs in the community.

To address this, we created a rudimentary screening instrument that would determine the most appropriate placement setting. Our agency began to identify youth with low-level offenses and divert them from being placed at Oak Hill, which should be reserved for youth with more severe offenses. We implemented a series of weekly step-down meetings to provide a vehicle to place low-level youth serving time at Oak Hill into community-based placements. This has helped us reserve scarce locked custody in our system for those who truly need to be in it for their safety and ours, and to more appropriately place other youth into a range of programs that better fit their offense behavior, strengths and needs. That way, not only do they get better and more appropriate services, but we avoid the contagion effect of placing lighter weight young people into locked custody with deeper-end youth. With the help of a foundation grant, we are now working with the National Council on Crime and Delinquency to refine our screening instrument, and we are seeking input on that instrument from the Courts, OAG and the defense bar. As you can see in the graph below, DYRS has substantially

decreased the number youth with low-level offenses at Oak Hill, reserving secure placement for the youth with the highest risk offenses.



Concurrent to the release of Casey’s analysis of our committed population, DYRS partnered with the Missouri Youth Services Institute to implement strength-based, therapeutic programming for those deep-end youth confined at Oak Hill. We believe that that training and coaching, which is partly paid for by a grant from the New York-based JEHT Foundation - will assist us in creating a DC-specific model to help our committed youth reach their full potential while reducing their likelihood of recidivating. In the early 80’s, Missouri’s Department of Youth Services closed down both of their large, brutal training schools after decades of reports on the maltreatment of youth housed in them. They replaced these prison-like institutions with smaller, more-homelike facilities closer to the youths’ homes and began staffing their facilities with well-trained “youth specialists” rather than corrections officers. Their results are astounding – Missouri boasts the lowest recidivism rate in the country – one third the reimprisonment rate of Oak Hill graduates.

What sets Missouri apart from other states is an emphasis on treatment. Youth participate in “circles”, “group-builders”, and other activities designed to build comradery and help youth explore the roots of their problem behaviors. Youth will progress through five learning phases of this model, identifying triggers to behaviors and

connecting to opportunities and supports so that they will not further penetrate the system. For example, in Phase III, the Growth phase, youth must identify typical situations and/or moods that lead to a loss of self control and learn, develop, and complete a relapse prevention plan. In phase IV, the Role Model and Leadership Phase, youth must work with their family to develop a positive support system to prevent the possible loss of control and/or delinquent behaviors. In this phase, youth must also act as a role model to the other residents and demonstrate how to cope with change and disappointment in a healthy way. During the final stage, the Creativity – Transition: Aftercare Phase, the youth’s service coordinator, Group Leader, Family Teacher and family begin implementing plans for educational, employment, and other services to connect youth to meaningful opportunities. This group process and phase system has been the cornerstone of success for Missouri.

We hope to follow the lead of our Missouri brethren and eventually surpass them. Prior to this partnership, Oak Hill Youth Center was utilized as a “way station” for youth who were pending less restrictive placements. Oak Hill lacked purpose and clear program objectives. It was also a decrepit facility that had been criticized, sued, and lambasted in the media for decades. Oak Hill staff, many of whom were skeptical of this approach are becoming believers as incident rates in the three ‘DC model’ units have plummeted and they have begun to see youth taking responsibility for their behavior and transitioning through these recovery phases to become positive peer leaders themselves. These reforms support the fifth goal I originally proposed to “establish a unit-management model to improve conditions in secure facilities”.

We have obviously initiated these reforms within the extraordinarily run-down, prison-like structure that is Oak Hill. While we have gradually been refurbishing that outmoded facility, softening the units, adding carpeting and comfortable furniture, pictures on the walls, wooden beds and desks in the youth’s rooms, etc., the basic design of Oak Hill, as a mini-prison, along with its dilapidated condition, fights against our reforms every day.

Fortunately, the physical plant issues that are not conducive to this new type of programming will be resolved with the opening of the new facility. The design is ideal for therapeutic and positive youth development programming and will include open spaces for running group builders and family programming, ample indoor and outdoor recreational space, and state-of-the-art facilities for educational and workforce development programming, which includes studios, labs, and a theatre.

Training, coaching and physical plant improvements to support this new model were only the first steps to implementing this new approach. We anticipated challenges with aligning other services to the DC Model early on and have taken active steps to address these challenges. At the time of my arrival, the Department of Mental Health was providing behavioral health services to youth and D.C. Public Schools was providing educational services. We believed that in order to ensure the success of implementing the DC model of therapeutic-milieu in secure programming, it was essential that DYRS assume the responsibility of providing behavioral health services and have more control over the educational programming. Building a seamless system of care under one agency, one vision, and one mission will support DYRS' reform efforts, while improving accountability for the outcomes of our youth.

In October of 2006, DYRS officially transitioned the delivery of behavioral health services from the Department of Mental Health to the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services. This transition was an enormous effort, involving transfer of FTE's, funding, legal interpretations, and clarification of the new roles and responsibilities for each respective agency. This transition came almost a year after the release of baseline report of mental health services, which was requested by the Special Arbiter of the Jerry M. Consent decree. The report cited a number of deficiencies in mental health services for youth at Oak Hill, including:

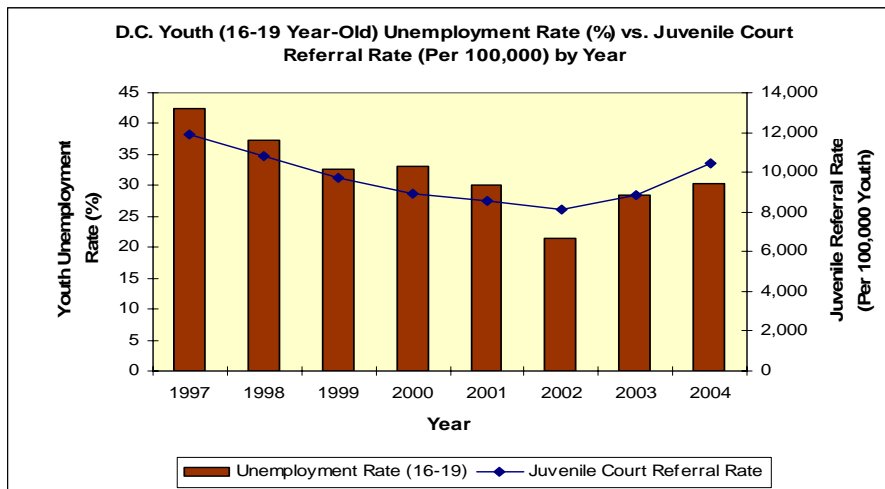
- Access to mental health services is not readily available to all youths (includes group therapy, individual therapy, etc).
- Backlogs in completion of Psychiatric Evaluations.
- Lack of access to acute care/emergency hospitalization.
- Lack of reporting and quality assurance that measures if youth have actually received services.

- No discharge planning to ensure youth access mental health services after they are released from secure care.
- Insufficient substance abuse education and counseling.
- Lack of adequate plan for suicide prevention.

Since the hiring of our Director of Behavioral Health, Evette Jackson, we have made significant strides in improving the delivery of behavioral health services. The quality and access to mental health services has dramatically improved, with behavioral health staff now assigned to units, working in partnership with secure care staff and youth to support the DC model. We have developed a suicide prevention plan that was approved by the Special Arbiter and have been closely monitoring our agency's compliance to the plan. Although this new division has only been operating for a few months and is not fully staffed, the quality of services has not been compromised and Ms. Jackson has effectively deployed staff to ensure that the youth at highest risk are receiving the services that they need. Having behavioral health staff on site to assist our Youth Development Specialists in running youth programming has greatly supported the implementation of the DC Model.

We all know that connecting youth to positive educational and workforce experiences reduces a young person's chance of recidivating and prepares them for a successful transition to adulthood. Since half of youth at Oak Hill require special education services, it is even more critical to provide innovative, high-quality educational programming that is tailored to their needs and interests. We have some of the brightest and most talented young people in the District of Columbia at Oak Hill and you will hear from one of these youth during this hearing. They deserve high quality educational programming that ultimately connects them to higher education and the workforce. They need to be provided opportunities to master the skills that are inherent in them and apply them to real-life positive experiences. Experiential-based educational programming that is tied to civic engagement and workforce development will allow our youth to demonstrate their mastery and competency and become fully engaged citizens.

In fact, data shows a strong correlation between crime and unemployment. Productively employing our young people will not only help them flourish, but we believe it is one of the best antidotes to crime that there is. The more time our youth spend doing right, the less time they will spend doing wrong. We also believe that if we prepare youth for some of the decent wage jobs that exist in D.C., like construction for example, some of the major construction companies will stop recruiting from West Virginia and start recruiting from West Virginia Avenue.



In mid-January, the Office of Contracts and Procurement issued a Request for Proposals to provide educational programming for youth at Oak Hill. Last week, the review panel, comprised of parents, educators, DYRS staff, and experts spent days reviewing proposals to ensure that our youth receive quality educational programming. I am excited about this opportunity to partner with the “best in the business” and look forward to learning how the successful applicant plans to infuse educational programming into the DC model, while connecting youth to education and workforce opportunities as they transition out of our care. We intend that this partnership will be a guiding light for other jurisdictions as they begin to look at model educational and workforce development programming for youth involved in the juvenile justice system.

By this time, you may be thinking that all of our efforts are focused on the DC Model and Oak Hill, which serves young men. We also have some exciting news about our plans for

girls programming. Now that the contracting process for education services is coming to an end, we plan to shift gears and focus on developing a Request for Proposals for a university-based, staff-secure residential program for girls. This program will be modeled off of Missouri's Rosa Parks program for girls located at the William Woods University in Fulton, Missouri. Under this model, the youth are able to benefit from the rich opportunities available in a college setting (e.g. dining in the university's dining halls, attending some college classes, and connecting to mentors within the university). This program will augment the other services in our community-based continuum of care, many of which have been successful in serving girls.

I would finally like to report on how we have maximized youth, family, community, and staff input and increased collaboration with other agencies, the third and fourth goal I spoke of when I originally took on this position. Early on, I made it a priority to have all of my senior level staff interviewed by parents and youth in our care. We have attempted to provide meaningful opportunities for youth and parents to contribute their thoughts and ideas about our reform efforts. As an advocate, I strongly believe that systems should be transparent and that outside groups should be able to scrutinize the work of an agency that serves the community. With that, we supported the establishment of a Parent Center at the Youth Services Center, which is being led staff and parent volunteers at Parent Watch. We have utilized this network of parents in a number of activities and most recently engaged one of the parents to review the educational programming proposals. Our future plans to support this goal include the establishment of a citizen's oversight body for both of our secure facilities, as well as a new Parent Center at the new Oak Hill replacement facility.

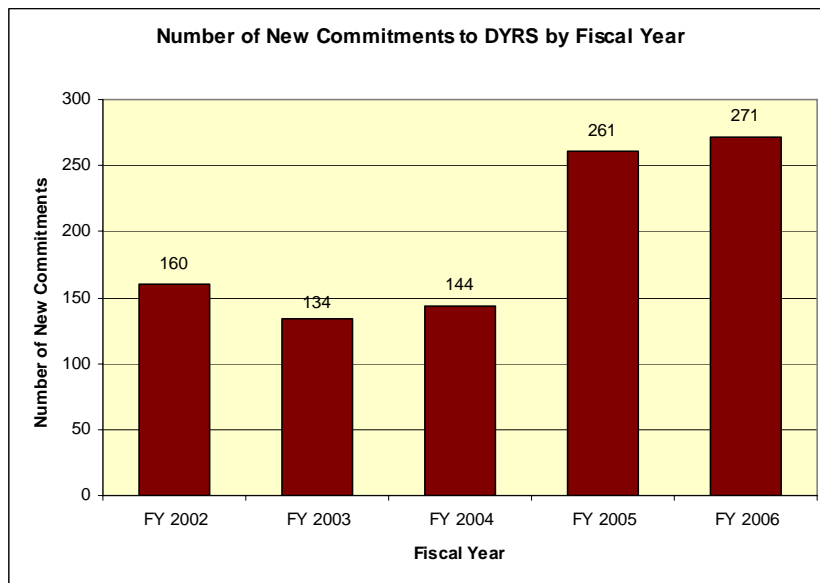
We also want to prepare our youth for civic engagement and youth-led advocacy. For the first time in our agency's history or to our knowledge, in the history of any youth correctional agency, we sponsored a Mayoral forum at Oak Hill and a voter registration efforts, so that youth could learn first hand about the candidates' political platforms and how they have an impact on their lives. Nearly a dozen Mayoral candidates, including

Mayor Fenty, attended the forum and were questioned by our youth for hours in the Oak Hill gymnasium.

As an outgrowth of these efforts, we have partnered with the Justice for D.C. Youth Coalition, a youth advocacy group that will be establishing a chapter at Oak Hill Youth Center in the coming months. Again, to our knowledge, this will be the first ever youth advocacy chapter in a secure youth facility. JDCY has been actively engaged in our efforts, organizing holiday parties, gift drives and other fun events for our youth. Last weekend, the youth fellows of JDCY conducted focus groups among youth at Oak Hill so they could help develop policy recommendations for City Council. They also trained the youth witness to testify in today's hearing. We are very excited about this partnership and are confident that this will greatly increase youth voice and youth participation in our reform efforts.

Our agency has engaged staff, other agencies, and community members in our reform efforts through the establishment of several Improvement Teams, charged with tackling issues ranging from the "Continuum of Care" to "Food Improvement" and "Serving Latino Youth". Last summer, we held our first annual "DYRS Summit" to share the reform efforts with our entire staff and to recognize all of the work that our staff has accomplished through the various improvement teams. We have also sought feedback through a variety of other vehicles, including Roll Call, Town Hall Meetings, and other community meetings hosted by agencies such as the Consortium of Youth Services, which represents many of our providers. Sometimes our staff disagree with us, sometimes vocally, but increasingly we're reaching out to them to hear their opinions and ideas, sometimes we're changing course based on their suggestions, and sometimes we're sticking to our guns. While I make every effort to communicate with my staff, listen to their ideas and even just be there so they can vent in what I consider to be the most difficult work in the District of Columbia, I also didn't take this job to run for class president and feel that I need to make decisions that, while sometimes unpopular, are in the best interests of the youth and District residents.

Over the last two years, that staff has seemingly moved mountains to improve services for our youth. Sometimes our work has produced unintended consequences that will require our vigilance and continued work. As we have improved services, or in some cases just talked about improving services, it has resulted in a sharp increase in commitments to the department (see chart below). These significant increases in commitments and shelter home referrals have come at a time when serious arrests for juveniles in DC have declined by 1% -- in other words, they are not driven by an increase in juvenile arrests. This has put a strain on our resources and in some respects, has slowed some of our efforts as we have had to hire additional case managers and as youth have backed up in our detention facilities awaiting shelter home placements.



Over the next year, I anticipate a number of challenges that, while they will require some heavy lifting on DYRS' part. I am confident that my staff, community partners, sister agencies, legal system collaborators, and the youth are up to the task. During Fiscal Year '08 we will complete the staffing of the Youth Services Center and will train all staff on the approach to detention reform. We will work with all of our JDAI partners to right-size our detention population, especially Judge Anita Josey-Herring who is outwardly claiming that she believes the District can become a model JDAI site over the next year. We will bring on a new educational provider at Oak Hill, complete the hiring of all Mental Health Staff, and train all staff at Oak Hill, including direct care staff, cooks, administrators and maintenance staff, on the new "DC Model." We will complete

construction on and open the new facility in Laurel which means that, for a time, we will run that new facility, the Youth Services Center, and the waning Oak Hill, all simultaneously. We will develop a screening instrument for committed youth based on the tenets of Positive Youth Development and, as is fitting with that strength-based approach, will have all of our committed youths' case plans developed through a Youth Family Team Meeting process. We hope that these are the kinds of reforms that will get us out from under Court supervision in the Jerry M. case during FY '08. But more importantly, we hope these reforms bring us closer to operating the kind of juvenile justice system that any of us would want if our own children were in trouble with the law.

I look forward to partnering with you in advancing our agency's reform efforts and creating a juvenile justice system that DC residents can be proud of.